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*Mohammed 'Abdu, late Mufti of Egypt.*—By RICHARD GOTTHEIL, Professor in Columbia University, New York.

THERE are few periods in its history during which the Mohammedan world has been so evidently in default of powerful and leading minds as at the present day. In Europe and in Africa, in Asia and in Polynesia—to whichever corner of Mohammedan statehood or civilization one turns—one looks in vain for the master minds in statecraft, in philosophy, in jurisprudence or in literature, that graced as well as guided the civilization of former times. The tide of spiritual witness to the faith has perhaps never ebbed so far away from its source. The products of real learning were probably never so rare; the Arab muse never so silent. In Turkey, it is true, the reins of government are held too tightly to permit the free development of the mind; in Morocco they are held too lightly, so that anarchy and political turmoil consume the vital forces of its people. Even India seems to have lost the infectious inspiration spread abroad by such men as Sprenger, Lees and Howell. Persia and Mesopotamia remain desert and unproductive. In Egypt—the greater home of the faith—literary activity seems to waste itself in the endless and weary drip of *sharḥ*, *mukhtaṣar*, *takmila*, *talkhīṣ* and *dhail*, or in the overwrought rhetoric of ephemeral imitations drawn after the manner of French drama and English penny-dreadfuls. The native presses of Bulak, Constantinople, Kazan and Fez are largely occupied in reprinting older works for the purposes of book trade speculation, or the worthless pamphlets of modern penny-a-liners. The pen has evidently passed from the hand of the Mohammedan into that of the stranger. The Catholics in Syria, the French in Algiers and Tunis, the Germans, the English and the Italians, are cultivating the history and the theology of Islam as its own votaries did in former days; while such Mohammedans as really have a message to deliver to their people are led into the mystic twaddle of a Bāb, or forced into the underground scheming and plotting of a Sanūsī.

A few men there are who loom up out of this spiritual degradation in their endeavor to keep up the traditions of more spiritual days. Such a one was Mohammed 'Abdu, Muftī al-Diyār al-Miṣrīyya; whose untimely death last year at the age of fifty-five has cut off the hope that he would prove a bulwark against which the tide of materialistic acquiescence in the newer order of things would break some of its force. To save his memory from utter oblivion is the object of the following lines—now that he is with Allah. A choice soul, clothed in all the nobility and in all the refinement of the truest Arab, such as stories and anecdotes have painted him for us, just and equitable to all, truly and largely charitable, courteous and courtly in his bearing—the friendship of a man like Mohammed 'Abdu is a precious memory to those that have been privileged to enjoy it.<sup>1</sup>

Born in the year 1266 A.H. (1850) in Shenara of the Gharbia Mudiriya of Egypt, he came from most humble surroundings. When he was four years of age his father, Sheikh 'Abdu, returned with him to the home of the family in Maḥallat Naṣr in the Behera Mudiriya. In 1279 A.H. (1862) he was sent to Tanṭa, where in the Jāmi' al-Aḥmadī he received his first instruction. The modest instruction that such a jāmi' at that day could afford does not seem to have sufficed a mind that was already actively in search of knowledge. He returned to his home, and a little later is found at Kunaisat Urin,<sup>2</sup> in the Behera, on the railway line Damanhur-Shabrakhit-Ityai. Here lived an uncle who was a Sufi and an ascetic, the darwish 'Othmān. Though he remained here only a short while, it is evident that the association with this austere man had much effect in forming the character of the young aspirant. His uncle persuaded him to read, as a daily exercise, a book by his own teacher, Mohammed al-Mudīnī al-Maghribī al-Shādhilī. Because of the moral teachings contained in this work, he studied it with much care. One day he asked his uncle what object such ascetics as he had in view. The answer was, "To hold on to

<sup>1</sup> The materials for this short study were given me by Mohammed 'Abdu himself and by my own Sheikh, Aḥmad 'Omar al-Maḥmaṣānī, a favorite pupil of the Mufti. A short account will also be found in the *كنز الجوهر في تاريخ الأزهر* of Sulaimān Raṣād al-Ḥanafī, Cairo, 1320 A.H., pp. 164, et seq.

<sup>2</sup> See the *Egyptian Postal Guide* for 1904, p. 162. Baedeker, *Égypte*, 1903, p. 25, "Konaïssé."

the Koran and to the Sunna." "And are not all Moslems like this?" asked Mohammed. "No," he answered, "the Koran forbids lying, and most of them lie in one way or another." "How then can I become like you?" was the next question. Whereupon he was advised to practice the *dhikr* and to read carefully the Koran. I do not know whether the young aspirant followed the advice thus given. He returned to Tanṭa, and in 1282 he went to Cairo to study in the Azhar Mosque. The formal instruction given there was still unsatisfactory; and after an attempt lasting three years he put himself in charge of a certain Husna al-Tawīl for the study of rhetoric. When Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī came to Cairo in 1288 (1871), Mohammed 'Abdu was quick to change to this more competent master, and studied under his direction the most various objects, grammar, prosody, philosophy, Sufism, medicine, physiology, and the science of traditions. It is idle to speculate upon the worth of so polygamous a teacher.<sup>1</sup>

While still a student at the Azhar he commenced to show a certain independence of judgment; an independence which was quite characteristic, and which at a later time caused him no little suffering. Some of his fellow students accused him to the Sheikh 'Alish Bāna, on the plea that he was secretly a follower of the Mu'tazilite heresy. It is a far-off cry, almost from the Middle Ages, this dispute in regard to the eternity of the Koran, the attributes of the Godhead, and the doctrine of predestination. The Middle Ages die hard in the Orient, and Mohammed 'Abdu was forced to clear himself. Though he confessed that he had forsaken the orthodox doctrines of al-Ash'arī, he denied having joined the Mu'tazilites. He declared himself to be a simple searcher after the truth, which was, of course, begging the question. In a more positive manner he was asked whether he understood and whether he taught the 'Akā'id of al-Nasafī, the pillar of the creed of the Sunnites, a favorite text-book of orthodox Mohammedanism.<sup>2</sup> He

<sup>1</sup> According to Mohammedan ideas, a teacher is indispensable. This is crystallized in the saying *من لا شيخ له فالشيطان شيخه*. See Snouck-Hurgronje in ZDMG., vol. liii, p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> Najm al-Dīn Abū Ḥafṣ 'Omar ibn Muḥammad al-Nasafī, died 1142 (Brockelmann, *Geschichte der Arabischen Literatur*, vol. i, p. 427), was one of the most important Hanifite teachers. The "'Akā'id" was rendered into English by W. Cureton, London, 1843.

seems to have completely cleared himself by his answer, and by his practice in regard to this work, so that in 1294 A.H. (1877) he received his first and his second diplomas as a teacher in the Azhar.

But he was marked out for some more important service. Riād Pasha, who had been Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1878 while the Public Debt Commission was sitting at Cairo, offered him the position of editor of the *al-Wāḳiu al-Miṣriyya*,<sup>1</sup> the *gazette officiel* that had been founded in 1832 by Mohammed Ali, and which is still published as the organ of the government. His excellent style and the boldness of his pen made the daily articles that he wrote, in a portion of the paper especially set off to this purpose, eager reading for the younger Egyptians. He did not scruple to severely criticise the government—an offence doubly heinous in an official journal. As a consequence, after a short time, he was compelled to transfer his duties on that paper to some one else. The troublous times of the dual financial control, of the rebellion of 'Arabi, of the bombardment of Alexandria and of the British occupation, quickly followed one upon the other. No one who has at all examined into the question upon the spot, can have a momentary doubt of the great service that the Anglo-Saxons since 1882 have rendered to the old empire of the Pharaohs. The years of plenty are there, as they always will be in that country under such a courageous and benign administration as is that of the present English Consul General. Law and order make the dingiest mud-alleys of Cairo more safe than are the palace-lined streets of New York. "Al-Lurd Cromer" (as he is called) is feared; but he is implicitly obeyed. Education is moving apace; by simple attrition wearing down prejudices that centuries of practice have consolidated; and the freedom from interference in religious and social practices, which is the brightest signature of British rule over all its subjects, contributes to render the populace happy and contented. Such a general estimate as this, which can be confirmed on many sides, need not blind us to the few defects of the reconstruction period. The years of plenty may as easily be followed by lean ones; and the mad rush of the

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<sup>1</sup> "The Events of Egypt"; see Hartmann, *The Arabic Press of Egypt*, pp. 2, 61.

speculative land-grabber and land-jobber is bound to concentrate enormous territories in the hands of a few rich European and native proprietors and to oust the fellah from his small peasant holdings. It seems a pity that with their hands entirely free, the English have not seen their way to forestall the natural results of such a sinister business as unlimited speculation.<sup>1</sup>

To the Egyptian, however, or let me say rather to the Mohammedan in Egypt at that time, the question must have appeared in a very different light. The country was upon the verge of financial ruin. Half the construction cost of the Suez Canal, i. e. more than £9,000,000, had been successfully squeezed out of Ismā'il by Ferdinand de Lesseps; and a debt of some £72,000,000 (\$102,187,000) in 1903 had been fastened upon the country.<sup>2</sup> No amount of British success in Egypt and for Egypt can wipe off the stain which has been left by the successive French and English steps taken to secure that success. And in 1882 success was more than problematical. The Egyptian Mohammedan was exposed upon the horns of a painful dilemma—either servitude or revolt. It is no wonder then that dissatisfaction soon gave way to disaffection. Whether 'Arabī Pasha was right or wrong, his attitude naturally claimed the attention of all Egyptians who had enough manliness left to be shocked at the showy magnificence of Ismā'il, and at the straits to which his extravagance, aided by Paris and London usurers, had brought the common people. His actions, in some measure at least, voiced the feelings of many of his compatriots. Among these was Mohammed 'Abdu.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See "Land Boom in Egypt," London *Daily Telegraph*, June 18, 21, 1906.

<sup>2</sup> On the spoliation of Egypt in the interest of the bondholders in Europe see the instructive extracts from the British Blue Books in Keay, *Spoiling the Egyptians*, N. Y. 1882.

<sup>3</sup> "In the East nationality is a matter of creed, not of race," Dicey, *The Story of the Khedivate*, p. 218. Westerners are liable to mistake the import of events in eastern countries. The attack made upon some English officers at Denshawai on June 13th, 1906 (see the White Paper, "Correspondence respecting the Attack on British Officers at Denshawai," Egypt, No. 3, 1906), is no more evidence of a patriotic uprising than is the dispute in regard to the delimitation of the frontier in the Sinai Peninsula, which commenced toward the end of 1905. This latter undoubtedly had its origin in Constantinople, and is now in process of happy settlement. (See the White Paper: "Correspondence respecting

Mohammed 'Abdu was a fervent patriot, but not in the sense in which we understand and so often misunderstand that term. In fact, patriotism for a certain and a particular land is a virtue practically unknown to the Moslem. Even the cry of "Arabia for the Arabians," which so clearly marked the policy of the greatest statesman in Islam, the second Caliph 'Omar Ibn al-Khattāb, had a very different significance. Indeed, the cry should be rendered "Arabia for the Moslems!"; for it was a real or fancied religious need that impelled 'Omar to take the course he did. All through Moslem history, we find no trace of secular patriotism, unless we call by that name the pride of race and of family. In fact, there is no word in the Arabic dictionary to connote the idea of patriotism; the modern expression, "*ḥibb al-waṭan*," being only a modern rendering for a European idea. The cry that was raised in Egypt during the eighties of the last century was thus in many respects a purely factious one, especially where even race pride has been swamped in the mingling of families as it has been in Egypt. To a select few, however, it embodies the thought of the spoiling of Egypt and of the degradation of the faith. To such a select few it was therefore a cry of truth, and to that select few belonged Mohammed 'Abdu.

What his share in the so-called rebellion was I have been unable to ascertain; but with many others, in the year 1882, he was exiled for mutiny. He went directly to Beirut, where he married a daughter of Sheikh Hamāda, cementing again the many bonds that have always bound Syria to Egypt. There he remained for ten years, one or two of which he spent in Ḥadath near Beirut, receiving his pardon only in the year 1892. Egypt was sorely in need of men educated as was Mohammed 'Abdu, and the Khedive Tawfīk was not slow to recognize his merits. He was first appointed judge of the lower court at Benha, then at Zagāzig. From there he was transferred to

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the Turco-Egyptian Frontier in the Sinai Peninsula," Egypt, No. 2, 1906). The same may be said of the agitation for an Egyptian Parliament, upon the lines laid down in Lord Dufferin's project of 1882, lately inaugurated by two such hot-headed newspapers as *al-Muawwad* and *al-Liwa*. In this connection, it is worth while to read the sane and informing comments of Lord Cromer in the White Paper, No. 2, mentioned above, pp. 32, et seq.

Cairo, and to a judgeship in a native court of appeal.<sup>1</sup> His appointment was confirmed by Tawfik's successor, 'Abbās II Hilmī. In the year 1894 a complete organization was effected in the control and management of the teaching of the Azhar Mosque. A governing board was formed with the Grand Mufti Sheikh Hasūna al-Nawāwī as president and al-Anbābī as vice-president. Mohammed 'Abdu was made a member of this governing board. Upon the death of al-Nawāwī in 1899, Mohammed 'Abdu was appointed Grand Mufti of Egypt; to which office also the surveillance over the Riwāk al-Hanafī belonged. At first he taught theology, rhetoric and eloquence; but he soon discontinued these subjects, confining himself to a daily lecture on the exposition of the Koran in the beautiful lecture-hall provided by the present Khedive. These lectures became so celebrated that they were published in the Cairo daily paper, *al-Manār*.

The authority of Mohammed 'Abdu as mufti was now supreme in Cairo; but his most potent influence was exercised in the Azhar itself. The power nominally rested with the Grand Sheikh of that famous school, al-Sayyid al-Biblāwī, and with his successor, 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Sharbīnī; but Mohammed 'Abdu was the head and leading spirit. His position there was a difficult one. At first he was in the good graces of 'Abbās II, and the two set about introducing reforms of various kinds, tending to modernize in some degree the life of the students and the instruction given. But the Khedive soon became discouraged with the opposition that his efforts encountered; and, as he himself told me, gave up the attempt in disgust. On his side, Mohammed 'Abdu became discouraged with the Khedive, because the latter's conduct in many things was in direct contravention of Moslem tradition, and because his speculations and his trading proclivities had lowered him from the high estate of a ruler to that of a merchant. Mohammed 'Abdu had travelled much in Europe. He had caught some little of the modern spirit, and he desired to infuse some of that modern spirit into the great Mohammedan university. We cannot now tell what amount of success might have crowned his efforts; but I know

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قاضي اهلي<sup>1</sup>.



no one who will be able at this juncture to fill the place that he has occupied.

It was while Mohammed 'Abdu was judge of the Court of Appeal that I first met him. In the year 1894 he had come to Switzerland to take the waters at Evien les Bains. He was then ignorant of any language other than Arabic. In February, 1905, I called upon the Grand Mufti in the Azhar to pay him my respects. As he came and sat beside me on the diwan, he said, in the most perfect French, "Some nine years ago I met in Switzerland a professor from New York"; until which moment I never suspected that the head of the faith in Egypt was the judge whom I had met in a strange land. During the years that had intervened he had returned a number of times to France; he had learned French better than I had supposed any pure Mohammedan in Egypt could learn. His speech was faultless in its grammar, and almost Parisian in its intonation. But far and beyond this, he had penetrated back of the mere outward signs of modern civilization. The European culture with which the modern Egyptian of Alexandria and Cairo vaunts himself is too often of the thinnest veneer—made up of the latest Parisian slang, the most extravagant boulevard costumes, and the sins of Paris *qui s'amuse*. At best he has read Guy de Maupassant, Catulle Mendès, and a good deal of the pornographic literature of which even many true Frenchmen are themselves ashamed. Mohammed 'Abdu had led a serious life, and he set himself to study seriously the development of thought in modern Europe. He had read Molière and Victor Hugo, Schiller and Goethe, Kant and Schopenhauer: and it was in the sacred halls of Dār al-'Ulūm, this stronghold of Mohammedan orthodoxy, that we sat in converse upon the newer life that had come to him.

Unfortunately, nothing remains of the written work of Mohammed 'Abdu that was produced in this last period of his life. The few works that he has published—partly in Cairo and partly in Beirut—are in no sense a proper witness to the full development of his mind. Perhaps the most important are his *Al-Taḥīd*,<sup>1</sup> a work full of the best religious and moral thought,

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رسالة في التوحيد<sup>1</sup>.

and his commentary upon a few of the Suras of the Koran.<sup>1</sup> This latter work, written for use in government schools, though following such canonical authorities as Zamakhsharī, Baiḍāwī and Ṭabarī, and though thoroughly Mohammedan in form and tone, is yet free from the many grammatical and theological conceits and the immoderate twists that disfigure and distort the usual productions of the *tafsīr*. A modern spirit breathes through his comments, a more modern and truly religious atmosphere seems to surround them. His lectures on the Opening Sura of the Koran have lately been published by Mohammed Rashīd Riḍā, editor of *al-Manār*, together with five articles written for that paper and treating of questions dealing with the Koran.<sup>2</sup> I might then mention also his commentary on the *maḳāmas* of Badī' al-Zamān al-Ḥamadānī,<sup>3</sup> the first Arabic writer to use that form of speech which was made so famous by al-Ḥarīrī; further, his commentary on the *Nahj al-Balāgha* of al-Murtaḍā,<sup>4</sup> containing the supposed ethical sentences of 'Alī, a polemical work *Kitāb al-Islām wal-Naṣrānīya, Risāla fī al-Rudd 'alā al-Mosieu Hanotau*. A larger work upon the history of Arabic traditions dealing with Egypt is still unfinished.<sup>5</sup>

Mohammed 'Abdu died in Ramla on July the 13th, 1905, and the universal esteem in which he was held was seen in the imposing ceremonial with which he was laid to his last rest.

<sup>1</sup> تفسير القرآن الكريم, published in the Government printing office, 1322 A.H.

<sup>2</sup> تفسير الفاتحة ومشاكلات القرآن مبدوء بمقدمة التفسير مقتبص من دروس الاستاذ . . . محمد عبده بقلم السيد محمد رشيد رضا منشىء مجلة المنار الاسلامى.

<sup>3</sup> شرح على مقامات بدیع الزمان (Brockelmann, *loc. cit.*, vol. i, p. 93), published Beirut, 1889.

<sup>4</sup> شرح نهج البلاغة (Brockelmann, *loc. cit.*, vol. i, p. 404).

<sup>5</sup> Mohammed 'Abdu read the proof-sheets of vol. iii of Ibn Sa'd's Biographies, and contributed a number of excellent suggestions and readings. See Eduard Sachau, *Ibn Sa'd*, vol. iii, p. xlii.